**THE GREAT WALL OF SILENCE:**

**VOICE-SILENCE DYNAMICS IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES**

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Living together with the dolls

Surrounded by the power of silence,

The world open around us,

We communicate in gestures.

Liu Xia

**Abstract**

How does the voice-silence dynamics affect the durability of authoritarian regimes? This article reformulates Hirschman’s voice, loyalty, exit model to answer this question. It demonstrates that the model’s heuristic value is significantly hampered by conceptual imprecision around the category of voice, a narrow understanding of exit, and – in particular – the neglect of the category of silence. Once these categories are conceptually reworked, and silence is placed next to voice and exit – as a core concept, not a residual category, in the model – the “dictator’s dilemma” emerges as a “silence paradox” hinting at some of authoritarianism’s main vulnerabilities. The case of China is used to illustrate the article’s key theoretical-conceptual advancements.

**Keywords:** Silence; voice; loyalty; Hirschman; authoritarianism; China

**Introduction**

This article explores a crucial problem: How does the voice-silence dynamics affect the durability of authoritarian regimes? Authoritarian regimes are known to control voice and to put considerable constraints on the types of claims their citizens can make. It is, therefore, tempting to see such regimes as ruling and prolonging their rule through silencing. But the interplay of voice and silence in authoritarian regimes is far more complex than this would imply. This much was hinted at by Benjamin Constant as he established the difference between old and new despotisms (1988, pp. 85-149). Old despotism, Constant claimed, ‘rules by means of silence, and leaves man the right to be silent”; modern despotism takes away this right and “condemns him to speak.’ (1988, p. 96) His rationale for this reversal is clear. Modern despotism merges popular sovereignty and autocracy, and, as such, has its bedrock in public opinion. To create a favourable public opinion, modern despotism ‘strikes people with one hand to stifle their true opinion, and subsequently strikes them with the other to force them to simulate the appropriate opinion’ (Constant, 1988, p. 95). Where speech is thus compelled, silence is the ultimate resistance.

As insightful as they are, Constant’s remarks would seem to point to a singular and simple opposition between compelled speech and silence as a shelter from speech’s compulsion. But this cannot sufficiently model the dynamics of voice and silence in contemporary authoritarian regimes, which are far more nuanced and complex in the way they deal with voice and the challenges posed by its absence or denial.[[1]](#endnote-1) To understand how they negotiate these challenges, we must move beyond Constant as well complement recent work on authoritarian resilience and decline. Much of it draws on Albert O. Hirschman’s theoretical model of exit, voice, and loyalty, but focusses on specific pairs of the two sets within Hirschman’s trilogy, in an attempt to specify the conditions for different exit-voice and exit-loyalty dynamics (Hirschman, 1970; e.g. Pfaff, 2006; Michaelsen, 2016; Albrecht & Ohl, 2016). While this has resulted in important reformulations and extensions of Hirschman’s original model, its heuristic value continues to be significantly hampered by its failure to address and elucidate the complexities of the voice-silence relationship. The aim of the article is to show that there is real purchase in complexifying Hirschman’s model by radically reconceptualising the category of silence and re-assessing its relationship with other categories – exit, loyalty, and, obviously, voice. In particular, once silence is properly conceptualised and its dynamics are fully appreciated, it becomes clear that there can be power in silence, and challenges faced by authoritarian regimes are best understood when the ‘dictator’s dilemma; is reconstructed as a ‘silence paradox’, whose counterpart is a ‘subjects’ dilemma’, with both, the *paradox* and the *dilemma*, arising from silence’s ambiguous signalling effects.

The article falls into four parts. I begin by critically examining the place of voice and silence in Hirschman’s original framework and the new relevance assigned to silence acquires in Brian Barry’s first major revision of it. I then move to section 2, in which I distance myself from both Hirschman and Barry by offering a conceptual reworking of the categories of voice and silence and reconsidering their relationship to loyalty and exit. Section 3 revisits the ‘dictator’s paradox’ and reconstitutes it as a ‘silence paradox’ involving both dictator and citizens. I conclude by assessing the heuristic value of the reformulated model against the case of contemporary China.

1. **Exit/Voice/Loyalty – And Silence?**

In *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970), Hirschman offers an elegant theory of how citizens or consumers might react to organisational or product decline. According to Hirschman, they face two options: giving up on the organisation or product (exit) or agitating for improvement (voice). Exit means here leaving, emigrating or turning to a competing organisation or product. It is, in Hirschman’s own words, ‘essentially a private and also typically a *silent* decision and activity.’ (1993, p. 194, my emphasis) Voice, by contrast, means staying and seeking to reverse a negative change in one’s environment by complaining, organising to complain or protesting. It is thus a political act in its essence (Hirschman, 1970, p. 16). Loyalty, the third *item* in Hirschman’s trio, is less an option in its own right than a psychological disposition that increases one’s propensity to choose voice over exit.

Even though Hirschman sees the exit option as a pre-requisite for voice influence, he takes exit and voice as essentially trading-off: where exit is easy, voice is less likely (1970, p. 43). This is for three main reasons. First, exit provides a low-cost alternative to voice, which is costly in terms of risk, effort, and time. Second, by not requiring coordination with others, exit eschews collective action problems affecting effective voice (organisation, representation, free-riding). Third, exit deprives a community of its most resourceful and most articulate members (Hirschman, 1993, p. 176). The implication is obvious: as the possibility of exit increases, the resulting silence is twofold, that of voices that leave and that of the depleted and/or leadership-deprived internal pool of voices.

Although there is a role for ‘silence’ in Hirschman’s original model it is folded into exit and its silencing effects upon the exited community. Exit is, for him, an exile *beyond* borders provoking an exile *within* borders through the silencing and depoliticising of those who stay behind. Massive exit can be destructive of an organisation. But controlled or even selectively deployed ‘silent’ exit (e.g., of high-profile dissenters, as it happens in China) can work as a safety valve taking away the ‘internal’ pressure of dissenting voice. Hirschman characterises exit in depoliticising terms: as a ‘minimalist way of expressing dissent’, not by acting ‘in concert with others’, but by leaving an organisation for purely instrumental reasons ‘without noise’ (1993, p. 194). Any potential political significance of silence is obscured by its conflation with a purely private, inconspicuous act of withdrawal.

For the integration of silence into the model as a separate category, which replaces exit as the conceptual opposite of voice, we need to turn to Bryan Barry (1974). Barry criticised Hirschman for positing that individuals face a single choice between exit and voice. This, he claimed, collapses two choices into one another. For, in effect, in each situation people face a choice out of two pairs of options, even if only by default: either exit (leave) or non-exit (stay), and if non-exit then either voice (participation) or silence (nonparticipation) (1974, p. 91).

Barry’s refusal to treat voice and exit as exclusive alternatives generates not one, but two new possibilities not originally envisaged by Hirschman: ‘silent non-exit’ *and* ‘exit and voice’. Let me take these in turn.

‘Exit and voice’ stands in contrast with Hirschman’s ‘silent exits’. The latter, we have seen, are portrayed as private acts of walking away, carried out for reasons of self-interest (Warren, 2011, pp. 693, 696). This portrayal is indebted to the dominant understanding of silence-as-absence (of voice). However, silence-as-signal provides a better model for acts of silent exit, since, in Hirschman’s own terms, they are an alternative to voice for the *expression* of grievances. Taken as signal, the silence accompanying exit is a communicative act – more concretely, a non-locutionary speech act expressing dissatisfaction by the exiting action itself. Rather than the absence of meaningful agency, ‘silent exit’ is a form of intentional agency. While its characterisation as ‘silent’ suggests powerlessness, the inference is too quick. Powerless can surely result from the fact that ‘silent exits’ are low information and need not therefore force responsiveness from the organisation exited. However, even where carried out quietly, for instrumental reasons alone, and in the absence of coordinate action, ‘silent exits’ can threaten and elicit a response, especially where they occur *en masse* and are perceived as signalling generalised dissatisfaction and regime vulnerability (Chwe, 1999).

As Barry postulates, however, not all exits are silent. Nor are they all private acts aiming exclusively at the protection of private interests or personal gain. Exits can be public in a threefold sense: when they harness publicity; when they retain a political attachment to the common good of those left behind; and when they are carried out (at least also) for public-minded reasons, in ways that involve, or come to involve, coordinated action, for the purposes of resistance, reform or revolution (Kirkpatrick, 2019). This is the case, for instance, with exile communities engaging in resistant exit, and acting as a voice for change at home.

Digital communication technologies have greatly enhanced these communities’ capacity to remain in touch and build up external pressure. They have lowered the costs of voice and require minimal to no coordination. Because of the threat they pose, authoritarian regimes have been quick to react by engaging in ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ forms of repression beyond borders: from internet surveillance and network intrusion, designed to induce insecurity and mistrust in the online group and cross-border linkages, to tactics of defamation and the persecution of relatives at home (Michaelsen, 2018). Where exit empowers voice, voice is – quite literally – broken down.

Turning now to ‘silent non-exit’, Barry sees it as occurring when, in face of an unattractive exit or the costs of speaking out, it is more rational to conform to the unfavourable *status quo*, even if one believes improvements could be made. Factors like distrust of public officials, a sense that there are no alternatives or that one’s voice has no impact, can lead one to exit politics into relative silence. Hirschman saw exit as an *action* signalling dissatisfaction. However, under the influence of overwhelming emotions (such as fear) and/or in the absence of alternatives, exit can be disempowered, and become a *passion* – that is, behaviour undergone through a form external to oneself and not as an act of self-determination. Barry follows this lead in treating silent non-exit as essentially *passive* and *non-agential*. As a capitulation or resignation to power, silent non-exit is potential voice (participation) self-censored into silence (nonparticipation), as Barry’s expression ‘suffer in silence’ indicates (Barry, 1974. p. 92). Like silent exit, silent staying represents a form of private withdrawal that contrasts with voice: an *exile within*, which disconnects and negatively affects the possibilities of collective action.

Barry’s other revisions concern loyalty. They are relevant to us since they have implications for voice. Hirschman saw loyalty as implying commitment to an organisation and as comprising a set of dispositions determining the relative costs and benefits for exit and voice. In particular, he saw ‘the likelihood of voice’ as increasing ‘with the degree of loyalty’ (1970, 78). Barry too treats loyalty as commitment. But he stresses one need not be committed to the organisation as such or to the organisation as the source of individual rewards for compliance. Loyalty might also concern improved collective welfare, leading Barry to conceive of two distinct possibilities: that people stay and speak out, braving the costs of voice; and that people stay and speak through the channels made available by the system in the hope of improving welfare for themselves and others. This is an important revision, pointing to two different types of voice, with different opportunity costs, and lending themselves to a different degree of co-option.

While Barry usefully extends and clarifies aspects of Hirschman’s voice-loyalty-exit model, his revisions are not free of problems. This is especially true of his treatment of silence. By importing the dichotomous structure of Hirschman’s alternatives, Barry commits himself to an understanding of silence as the Other of voice, and of voice as active whereas silence is passive. Hence Barry’s equation of the political subject with the speaking subject, through the treatment of voice as participation – and thus action, empowerment, engagement, and mobilisation – and of silence as non-participation – and thus inaction, disempowerment, disengagement, alienation. Barry can thus make sense of silence as a manifestation of the workings of power (i.e., as in silencing, through the costs imposed on voice) and of silence as a shelter from power (i.e., as defensive withdrawal imposed by such costs), but not of silence as undermining the workings of power or indeed *as* political power. To posit these other possibilities, we need to reconceptualise silence, so that it might permit tones beyond the ‘deep resignation that nothing can be done’ or the ‘totalizing ideological conditioning that produces quiescence’ (Jungkunz, 2012, p. 143, n.62). These are often taken for the whole of silence under authoritarianism.

1. **Reworking Voice and Silence**

In this section I move beyond the narrow conceptualisations of voice and silence we find in both Hirschman and Barry, and also beyond their implication: that voice and silence necessarily trade-off against each other.

Let me start with voice. One can articulate a useful, working concept of voice from Hirschman: acts with linguistic content (arguments, assertions, etc.) as well as activities that can involve or translate into linguistic content (protests, demonstrations, petitions, etc.) (Warren, 2011, p. 696). Hirschman defines voice broadly as ‘any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs’, while also likening it specifically to ‘interest articulation’ (1970, p. 30). As Barry remarks, this is too narrow in two important respects. First, given the individualistic and instrumental premises, voice comes reduced to interest articulation or political (re-)action for one’s individual benefit. Second, under ‘any attempt at all to change’ fall very different types of voice, which are not sufficiently discriminated. For at least as important as to note that voice translates an attempt to change organisations is to specify what type of change is sought: namely, a change *in* the organisation or a change *of* organisations. The difference is critical and best captured by distinguishing between two types of voice: *reformist* or regime-*engaging* voice, designed to ‘improve the performance or responsiveness of an organisation or state’, and *insurgent* or regime-*threatening* voice, referring to activism designed ‘to rebel against an organisation or state and thereby replace it or compel it to change its policies.’ (Pfaff, 2006, p. 21) The former makes demands *on* (and often *through*) existing institutions and intends to preserve them through improvement; the latter aims to challenge and possibly repeal them. Authoritarian regimes will normally engage in the containment and suppression of insurgent voice, especially where backed *by* or leading *to* mobilisation and collective action. But they will often have a vested interest in facilitating, if not promoting, regime-engaging *critical* voice for this is key to improved governance. This is the rationale behind the multiplication of deliberative practices within authoritarian rule. Voice generated and channelled through deliberative mechanisms can be used to pre-emptively deal with dissent and complaints, maintain order, generate information, and produce more legitimate decisions (Warren and He, 2011). It also explains why authoritarian regimes may tolerate more criticism in the media than would be expected. In the late 1980s ‘supervision by public opinion’ entered the vocabulary of the Chinese Communist Party, and it has since become an instrument to advance the interests of central and local political actors. Despite control and censorship, investigative reporting is not rare in China. This is partly because central government uses it to *monitor* local officials, deflect responsibility for corruption and ineffective rule, and enhance central legitimacy; and local officials rely on it to force compliance amongst their own and secure cadre promotion (Chen, 2017). President Xi Jinping is notorious for using the media to rally the pubic around his hallmark anti-corruption campaign. He has used critical mediatic voice to enforce policy and – in a new, inwards, selective purge movement – to secure control over the party – especially, over rival, leadership-*threatening* voices in it.

It is therefore not only voice, but also voice’s relationship to loyalty, that require reconsideration. Under Hirschman’s original model, loyalists are trusted to build organisational capacity by engaging in reformist voice. But one can easily foresee circumstances in which loyalty may block or delay rather than spur voice. Highly repressive organisations, expecting unreserved obedience, conformism and deference of its ‘loyals’, are likely to silence independent voice. But even under less stringent conditions, loyalists whose loyalty is bought with senior positions, privileges and grants, if convinced their reformist voice will have considerable personal costs and/or little influence, will be tempted to leverage it, or, indeed, to simply adopt a passive and hopeful waiting for things to improve.

In either case, the likelihood of loyalists to bite their tongue is high. The resulting silence constitutes a *threat* to the regime, given its information costs. It is important to pause to establish what silence might mean here, as it is not obvious. It is certainly not the same as unilaterally remaining quiet. In effect, this might not be an option for loyalists reluctant to express their views. Simply withdrawing into silence might betray their unsatisfaction. It would therefore be misleading speak of a spiral of silence when referring to the process whereby reformists potentially capable of pushing for change, but feeling their opinion is unpopular, reinforce the *status quo* (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Instead of slipping into silence, in the hope of going unnoticed, they will selectively self-censor while simultaneously signalling support for the *status quo* (Kuran 1995, p. 113). This is likely to generate pluralistic ignorance regarding private opinion and the true state of affairs. But it is also likely to involve speech in signalling support, so why speak of silence? And the answer is: because speech and silence are false opposites. Silence can result as much from a failure to utter as from a failure to secure uptake. Speech can be *silenced*, for instance, because conditions have been made such that the speaker is unable to successfully perform her intended illocutionary act (Langton, 1993). This is not the case with our reformists. However, their structural conditions are such (repressive equilibrium, dependencies, etc.) that their loyalty risks losing its meaning and their speech risks becoming meaningless (Jowitt, 1992). Philip Pettit has argued, using Mao’s China as his example, that in societies where freedom of speech does not exist or is very limited silence means nothing (1994). But just as silence also speech can be communicatively disabled where voice is made too costly for the dissatisfied. This is because dissimulation becomes then a crucial element of speech, and to say some *things* is probably to be *silent about* those other things that would matter most for the regime’s decision-making.

Turning now to forms of silence that do involve cessation of speech, their political significance is obscured by their conflation with private withdrawal. Both Hirschman’s ‘silent exit’ and Barry’s ‘silent non-exit’ are forms of withdrawing or cutting off from, the polity or politics, respectively. They also stand for minimal action or the absence of action – and therefore also of *a* political subject, in that they describe forms of nonparticipation (in the life of an organisation, whether exited or non-exited). But this is misleadingly reductionist, and gears towards the univocal association of silence with passivity and submission to power’s demands. There are, however, two distinct ways in which silence can be produced: by active *commission* or by passive *omission* (Scott, 2017, p. 5). Silence as an act of passive *omission* is a *not-doing* something, or a negative non-decision, resulting in a neglect, failure or inability to act. This inability to act in one’s own interests (or indeed in the interests of the public) is often the outcome of an internalized sense of powerlessness, or *habitus* of resignation, translating into a deep-seated dispositional resistance to action, as is typical of states of alienation, experienced at an embodied level as apathy and inertia (Charlesworth, 2000, p. 71). The resulting silence signals the presence of an absence. Alternatively, however, silence as an act of *commission* is a *doing* a non-something or a deliberate, positive decision *not to do* (speak, say, etc.) and is best understood as asserting presence. Only this type of silence can constitute a *deliberate* act of communication, or a form of *voice*-by-silence. Insubordinate silences, of refusal, resistance, or protest, are all acts of *commission*, though not all of them act as insubordinate tools *for* communication or seek the visibility normally associated with voice – only the silence of protest does (Jungkunz, 2012).

The binary omission/commission is purely for analytical clarity, as the social reality of silence is more complex. Silences can – and do – often contain elements of both, omission and commission, and in practice they can fold into one another. Citizens discouraged with their limited choice of exit (e.g., no opposition parties) might choose to express dissatisfaction by doing a *non*-something (e.g., not voting, although, one should note, mono-party authoritarian regimes tend to “compel” voice, by having mechanisms – hard and soft – to control abstention). Over time, without the leverage of alternative options, the silence of resistance can slip into a silence of resignation or neglect. Silence can thus be both the means of oppression and/or the means of resistance against oppression – the distinction not being always apparent. This ambiguity – and the resulting unknowability of silence – can hold an extraordinary power *over* an authoritarian regime, even if it does not necessarily give anyone or any group power *against* it. To this dilemma I turn next.

1. **Silence’s Dilemma**

Now that we have considered the broader spectrum of voice and silence, the dynamics of voice and silence in authoritarian regimes can be more productively resumed.

I propose we take the so-called ‘dictator’s dilemma’ as our point of departure (Wintrobe, 1990; 1998). This influential explanatory framework embraces the view that authoritarian regimes rely on repression to hold to power. Repression refers here to a broad spectrum of restrictions: of the rights of citizens to criticise government, the freedom of the press, opposition parties, and groups and associations who might constitute opposition to the ruling party. These restrictions gain traction by being backed by close monitoring of the population and sanctions for disobedience.

But a dilemma emerges from this: repression engenders fear, and with fear comes a reluctance of the population to signal dissatisfaction, dissent, criticism. This creates, in turn, a paradox. Power and knowledge are inversely related. Repressive power cuts itself off from the knowledge it needs to keep power. The paradox results from what is primarily a signalling problem: repression breeds silence, and silence bars the regime from knowing the level of support it has among the general population and/or among powerful groups within it. With repressive power turning the signalling off, the regime loses its capacity to identify and halt dissatisfaction, which, where no option is left, can spiral into regime-threatening resistance.

The regime’s way out of the paradox – it is argued - relies on a combination of repression with loyalty. Neither is a panacea on its own. Excessive repression was the problem in the first instance; it attaches such high costs to voice that critical information ceases to flow to government. Furthermore, excessive repression has diminishing returns: it feeds resentment, undermines legitimacy, and arms opponents. Hence, while repression will always be necessary to halt citizen resistance beyond its short-lived, localised, and non-regime threatening manifestations, authoritarian regimes need to avoid *excessive* repression and to shift blame for *necessary* repression. This can be achieved, for instance, through decentralisation, as it happens in China. Central government delegates power to deal with popular resistance to lower-level authorities, thereby shifting blame. Delegation also induces moderation. Fearing central government intervention for repression that is ineffective or excessively forceful, local authorities have incentives to use repression/concession effectively and moderately (Cai, 2008).

Let us now turn to loyalty. Loyalty can be bought off, through the distribution of positions, privileges and grants, especially amongst those too powerful to repress or more easily satisfied. But this strategy has limitations too. In buying off the powerful the regime can make them more powerful still, and a potential menace to itself. To avoid this, competition must be stimulated. Furthermore, loyalty is bought by distributing positional goods, which, by their very nature cannot be distributed to the whole population. One can buy the loyalty of lower level officials and of Chinese Communist Party members but not of 1.4 billion Chinese. Hence, the solution is not repression, with its regime-threatening silencing effects, nor loyalty, with its limited reach, but *voice*. This is not Constant’s compelled, manufactured, assenting voice, however. Tolerating *dissenting* voice that is *not* regime-threatening increases regime resilience by improving the information flow (Cai, 2008). This supports feelings of responsiveness, better governance and legitimacy. It is thus by identifying sources of grievances, implementing policies favouring citizens, and readjusting those which do not, that a regime makes itself most secure.

The ‘dictator’s dilemma’ puts its premium on repression. But the ‘dilemma’ arises specifically from the *silencing* engendered. This undercuts the regime, by cutting it off from vital information from the general population and even – as we have seen in the previous section – from the regime’s officials. One could thus perhaps more aptly call it the *paradox of silence*. What makes the situation paradoxical is that the very silence that signals the regime’s repressive power undercuts the regime’s power to prevent threats to itself. Silence presents a dual threat: 1) it makes the demos unknowable, and acts as an insurmountable cognitive threshold between what citizens (and lower officials) know and what the regime knows; 2) there are incentives to construe silence either as irrelevant or interpret it in a suitable manner, but, if interpreted wrong, namely if coercion or strategic conformity are mistaken for consent, the regime blinds itself to the reality of its situation and is likely to fail to address it.

Where everyone is silently compliant, what does the resulting silence *mean*? It could be simply the product of fear; the sound of reluctant acceptance; the prudential self-censorship of those who abhor the regime but want to survive, or even progress *in* or *despite* it; or indeed the sign of approval and adulation. The point is that one cannot know, and this unknowability comes full of menace. Where all voices of dissent are silenced, how can the regime gauge the extent of dissatisfaction and respond to it appropriately, before a breaking point is reached? The answer is that it cannot, and this is the reason why silence, or fake acquiesce, have sometimes been invoked as ways of sabotaging a regime’s capacity to ‘make sound practical judgments.’ (Allen, 2010, p. 117)

Silence can be tactically deployed in this way by alleged ‘loyalists’, expected to speak truth to power. But loyalists may have more self-interested reasons to prefer silence – or faking support – to engaging in reformist voice, despite witnessing regime decline, namely, the fear of sanction or reward loss (Jowitt, 1992). The silencing of independent voice – in the elite and in the general population – compromises regime survival by disabling prophylactic engagement with resistance (which has turned silent), but also, and importantly, by inducing degeneration. When silencing engenders widespread inactivity amongst dissatisfied and alienated subjects, it bears the risk of irreversible continued decay *without* rebellion. When silencing produces regime ignorance about the levels of discontent amongst the population it bears the risk of an overthrow of regime by a rapid upsurge of protest. This is especially the case where a series of conditions are met: vulnerability is perceived, signalling problems are overcome**,** reasonable expectations that others will rebel are formed, and organisational networks exist that can mobilise such expectations into effective action (Chwee, 1999).

To envisage these possibilities, however, one needs to be attuned to differences within silence. While much of the silence that is heard in authoritarian regimes is the silence of *omission* or the sound of being acted *upon*, some of will be tactically deployed or an active *making*. This is necessarily so because where the costs of voice and exit are excessively high, the alternative to conformity may be silent refusal (which implies positively embracing *inaction*, or ‘leaving’ a ‘failed’ community, even if this is only, as Barry indicated, an “internal emigration”) or resistance (which embraces silent *action*, to interrupt and subvert the normal flow of communication and power relations) (Jungkunz, 2012). In both cases, keeping silence is not simply an imposed, internalised form of behaviour, but also a choice of political action – and therefore a form of participation in the life of the community, attending to, while actively seeking to reconfigure, existing power relations.

One of the likely effects of domination is silence – or, should we perhaps say, silencing, which better conveys the idea of being *acted upon*. Domination need not, however, involve being under someone’s thumb, or the eminent threat of coercion. In effect, authoritarian regimes are at their most effective when they need not exercise direct coercion, because the threat has been internalised and generates adaptive preferences. Over time, domination tends to become an embodied disposition rendering individuals reluctant to exercise voice and to be complicit with their own oppression, not the least because, as Montesquieu reminds us, authoritarian regimes are structured such that ‘being afraid, being submissive, and keeping an eye on one’s personal prospects fit together perfectly.’ (Robin, 2000, p. 354) This is the case, for instance, with the journalist who, to keep her job, ‘chooses’ to report state-fed news, rather than investigate and report political or corporate corruption; or the student who avoids political topics and focus instead on getting a good engineering job. Domination can also have depoliticising effects in ways that do not relate directly to fear, vulnerability, or reward: when dissatisfied subjects lack alternatives to exit to, they may find voice-action purposeless, and withdraw into a relative silence or apathy.

Not all silence one hears in authoritarian regimes is the silence of omission, inaction, nonparticipation, or accommodation, however. Much silence will be approving, especially where economic growth is secured, rents are distributed, and welfare provisions made. Some silence will be disapproving, but mainly defensive, sheltering one *from* power. Such is the case, for instance, with s/he who has decided not to write anymore on WeChat because s/he fears the monitoring of her dissenting opinions. This silence is a *making*, but one that is produced at the intersection of *acting* and being acted *upon*. The conscious capacity for control on the part of the dominant party – the state, its capacity to coerce, intimidate, and surveil, can – and does breed silence –, but this can still be seen as silent agency, involving tactically *doing* a non-something. Other cases make it more apparent that silence under authoritarian regimes can be a *doing*, a form of political engagement, and that the political actor is wrongly restricted to the speaking actor. Take, for instance, the dissident who refuses to speak in court so as to boycott and protest against proceedings she deems illegitimate. Her keeping silent is an act of resistance - a political statement proclaiming the injustice of the accusations while also challenging a criminal system dependant on (compelled) voice: public confession and recantation.[[2]](#endnote-2) In not saying, not writing, not talking, not telling, political actors are not simply communicating discontent (which they are too). They engage in a micropolitics of subversion.

But although silence can be as powerful as speech, especially where speech is expected and silence denies it, it would be incautious to over-emphasise the power silence holds. This is because the paradox of silence does not apply exclusively to the dictator. It applies to subjects as well. A regime producing silence can collapse in on itself from neglect. Subjects’ silence, even where resistant, can, in turn, sustain the regime’s power, through the spiralling of silence and accommodation. This is compounded by the fact that although silence is an attractive means of expressing dissatisfaction and carrying out everyday subversion under authoritarian regimes, in that it carries less costs than voice and avoids collective action problems, it can also be a considerable obstacle to the mutual signalling of dissatisfaction upon which any likelihood of collective action rests. In other words, if most remain silent, their silence will reinforce the impression that dissenting voices are a negligible minority on ‘the wrong side of things’. This, in turn, disables responsiveness, connected resistance, and collective action, creating pressures for conformity in its stead. While there can be power in keeping silent, breaking silence – even if by dramatically performing silenc/ing in public – remains essential (but not sufficient), for the production of political change.

1. **Breaching the Great Wall of Silence**

Authors reformulating and extending Hirschman’s exit, voice and loyalty framework have often held their sights on China. In Steven Pfaff’s seminal *Exit-Voice Dynamics*, the mutually reinforcing potential of the exit-voice dynamics leading to East Germany’s peaceful collapse comes to the fore when placed against the Tiananmen’s 1999 military crackdown of internal pro-democratic popular protest (Pfaff, 2006, pp. 1-2, 166-170, 263). Pfaff contrasts China with the GDR, while drawing a parallel between the GDR and North Korea, given the latter’s potential for a similar mass exodus. In a more recent, prize-winning article (Clark, Golder &Golder, 2017), this is reversed: China is placed alongside North Korea as regimes marked by the ‘little use of voice by their citizens’ and where governments ‘feel free to ignore them because their citizens lack credible exit threats.’ (2017, p. 726)

The conclusion – we have seen – is misleading. It results from the literal application of Hirschman’s exit-voice trade-off to a regime that has understood that tackling the ‘paradox of silence’ is key to its resilience. As such, in addition to engaging in voice suppression and control, China has come to tolerate, facilitate and even encourage voice, insofar as it helps it maintain order, generate information and reinforce legitimacy by securing responsiveness. To offer a systemic review of the voice-silence dynamics in a regime as complex as contemporary China is beyond the remit of this article. The point of this section is more modest: to show how the theoretical-conceptual work done up to this point helps us explain why China feels the threat of silence and sees ‘voice’ as key to meeting it.

It is not hard to see, however, why the thesis that China rules by silencing – i.e., by allowing ‘little use of voice’ is so entrenched. According to the Freedom House report of 2017, ‘China is home to one of the world’s most restrictive media environments and its most sophisticated system of censorship’. The Chinese government’s programme of online censorship is by far the largest in the world. Space for independent opinion and political criticism has, if anything, been reduced in recent years, under Xi Jinping.

This reality is reflected in Chinese science fiction, which, in this respect, runs the risk of running behind fact. A case in point is Ma Boyong’s widely popular, ‘The City of Silence’, a dystopian piece, published in 2005, in *Science Fiction World*, a Chinese science fiction magazine. The piece describes a world of technological totalitarianism, and is sometimes referred to as the Chinese version of Orwell 1984. Heavily edited, even if originally set in New York to get past China’s state censors, the work takes us to the year of 2046. It portrays a world in which virtually all social interaction takes place online, with a brutal regime closely monitoring and controlling any verbal exchanges. Control comes in the form of the imposition of an ever-diminishing ‘list of healthy words’. Instead of censoring filtered keywords, while continuously battling with cheat – familiar to any Chinese web user – of writing about ‘'polit/cs,' '政itics,' 'pol/itic$', and so on –, the ‘Department of Propaganda’ embraces the neater solution of restricting speech to a permitted vocabulary. The work’s main character, a lonely computer programmer, acting under the pseudonym Wang Er, from the dissident novels of Wang Xiaobo, watches words being added to the blacklist – one-by-one – until the world goes speechless because all language is forbidden.

As suggestive as Ma Boyong’s work may be, however, fiction and reality mix in more complex ways. As we have seen when analyzing the ‘paradox of silence’, shutting down citizen voices makes social and political reality unknowable – it denies authoritarian regimes information about citizen dis-satisfaction and bureaucratic performance. Deprived of this information, they can succumb to misperceptions, be misled about the truth of their situation and see their capacity to act in their world diminished or even blocked. A regime communicatively closed-off from its citizens is a regime to which citizens cease to bring grievances, in the expectation of seeing them answered. This strikes at the heart of the regime’s legitimacy, and forces citizens to seek alternatives and place loyalties elsewhere (Dimitrov, 2008). Hence, it should not be an option for China to turn into a ‘City of Silence’.

Authoritarian resilience increases with allowance for and even engagement with relatively independent voice. This can be achieved through freer media. Although newspapers remained controlled, China’s decision that newspapers should become commercial, in 1998, made them more active in facilitating public opinion. But there is a downside to this. Freer media can amplify dissenting voices and become themselves a counter-voice exposing regime-vulnerability – the smell of blood that may connect dissent and make it regime-threatening. In authoritarian regimes, media freedom and censorship need thus careful balancing (Lorentzen, 2012). In China, where the absence of free media has (in)famously shielded lower-tier bureaucrats from transmitting information and being accountable to higher levels of government in scandals such as the SARS, AIDS and Bird Flu, the scales have been strategically rebalanced, but they are again dangerously tipping in favour of control and censorship.

Over the years, China has taken multiple measures to overcome the great wall of silence that might have otherwise inscribed itself between the Chinese leadership, its citizens, and its lower-tier bureaucrats. These include the decentralization of government and economic decision-making as well as semi-competitive elections at municipal and provincial levels, whereby local government gathers information about citizens’ interests while the CPP maintains ultimate control over the congress institutions (Manion, 2015). At least equally important, if not more, has been the regime’s allowance for and engagement with narrow local protest as a means of gathering information about and dealing with pockets of discontent (Chen, 2012). Growing protest in nondemocratic countries is often seen as the surest sign of regime decline. China, however, seems to have been able to co-opt protest and to evolve ‘informal norms of contention’, designed to scale down conflict and lead protestors to censor themselves, using less contentious means or milder forms of dissenting voice (e.g., petitions) to make their claims (Li, 2018). Although localized short-lived protest is tolerated, protest involving higher-level organisation among protestors is seen as regime-*threatening*, and invites repression (Edin, 2003).

The same principle applies to the censoring of views expressed in the Internet and social media. China’s market-oriented economic development depends on the access to information and scientific innovation that the Internet promotes. As the Chinese people flocked to the Internet to explore their newly gained power to communicate and to hold officials to account, the Chinese leadership started to explore the new powers this opened. Monitoring citizens’ exchanges in these media is an inexhaustible source of information about citizen concerns, the state of public opinion, the impact of public policies, and the behavior of public officials. Hence, before the Xi’s regime recent attempts to closely censor, constrain, and ideologically shape the contents online, the target of censorship was *not* dissenting voice as such, even where explicitly directed to the Chinese state, its policies, or its leaders, but voice sustained *by* or eliciting regime-threatening collective action. As a 2013 study of online censorship in China concluded, in respect to critical speech online, the Chinese people were ‘individually free but collectively in chains.’ (King, Pan, & Roberts 2013, p. 339)

This freedom has declined since. As the Internet became a major vehicle of dissent and a sense of community developed amongst Internet denizens, it started to be feared as an organizational network capable of connecting grievances and supporting large-scale, regime-threatening protest. Tight control of the spread of ‘dangerous information’ followed, with the Great Firewall, the Golden Shield, and then a cyber army of more than 2 million monitors, pursuing ‘security’ by censoring and replacing contents. A great wall of silence is building up as a result: through censorship, self-censorship (with postings becoming more personal, less political), simulation, and exit. Beyond a certain point, the paradox of silence/ing can start producing its effects: stagnation (through the crackdown’s economic and scientific costs), depletion of recuperation mechanisms (by cutting off from citizen information and monitoring) and social instability (through radicalization of those deprived of outlets for expression and redress).

The tightening of control over the Internet was precipitated by the largest post-Tiananmen political protest in China by the Falun Gong. Email was instrumental in organizing their 1999 silent demonstration. The case of the Falun Gong is instructive, and the reasons why become clear through the application of the conceptual framework worked out in this article. Insofar as the movement posed and continues to pose a threat to the Chinese regime, this comes from a combination of two categories I have added to Hirschman’s original scheme, both of which presuppose and enact the organizational capacity that the regime sees as a threat to its stability: ‘silent non-exit’, where ‘silence’ marks peaceful insubordinate collective action (rather than Barry’s inaction), and ‘resistant exit’, which (unlike Hirschman’s silent exits) is all but quiet. Let me take them in turn.

I start with ‘resistant exit’. To portray ‘exit’ as silent withdrawal moved by purely self-interested considerations is to disempower it politically. Exit can be resistant, and political through and through: ‘resistant exit’ uses ‘the exit to express opposition or to further the cause of disrupting dominant powers’ (Kirkpatrick, 2019, p. 151). ‘Resistant exit’ can take place internally as well as externally. If occurring internally, it has to circumvent existing restrictions on voice, while securing publicity, in order to fulfil its goals. In China, this is most noticeably the case with self-immolations in Tibet, which seek to address several audiences, both internal and external, including the international community, political exiles and the Tibetan government-in-exile, with their dramatic silent call for autonomy and independence. But exit need not take such an extreme form. Political exile is a far more common form of exit, in which exiters push for changes in their former homeland by lobbying the international community, while continuing to communicate and coordinate with their sympathizers back home. Again, the Falun Gong are a case in point. By the late 1990s they had expanded globally, and their leader had migrated to the US, while still coordinating action in China. The movement’s subsequent silencing at home only contributed to their voice being taken up more seriously abroad. The reinforcement of their external profile, and their strategic use of the international stage to criticize China’s human rights record continues to delegitimize the Chinese government to this day.

In a context where speech is censored, controlled, and channeled, deliberate silence stands out, and can do so menacingly.[[3]](#endnote-3) As Hirschman noted, dissatisfaction can be expressed silently with no need for uptake, response or further communication, especially where there are no alternatives to withdraw to. It works differently, however, when silence is an active performance soliciting multiple audiences – and not just any performance, but a collective action, something people *make* together as a coordinated group.

Publicly making silence together, I submit, constitutes a potential major challenge to dominant power relations within an authoritarian regime, and the main reason for this is that it disrupts the assumption on which it thrives: that silence or silencing can be claimed as consent. It is therefore not coincidental that the April 25, 1999 silent protest staged by the Falun Gong marked a turning point in the relation between the Falun Gong and the Chinese authorities, with consequences for Chinese society as a whole. The group had organized hundreds of peaceful protests before, which were broadly tolerated by the regime, but this one operated a step change from regime-*engaging* to regime-*threatening* (Li, 2018).

Why was their silent protest taken as a threat to China’s stability? To answer the question, we have to look at the protest, and to what the authorities might have seen in it. The protest took place just a few weeks before the 10th anniversary of the June 4, 1989 bloody crackdown in Tiananmen Square. Using the Internet and mobiles to coordinate action, some 10 000 Falun Gong practitioners massed on the streets outside the Zhongnanhai compound, the Chinese Communist Party Headquarters in Beijing, in the largest, and most unusual, protest since the 1989 student-led pro-democracy demonstrations. Unlike before, these were not defiant, idealistic youths in their twenties. They were middle-aged and elderly women and men, mostly in their forties through sixties, seating down in orderly rows. They showed none of the usual signs of expressing demands – the big character posters, the banners, the slogans, the chanting. Instead, they kept silence. Their silence was a strategic choice. Where speech is risky and gives license to repression, silence can provide the vulnerable a less costly and not as easily repressed means of insubordination. But this was also a conspicuous choice. Their silence was a sight (and sound) to behold, especially against a background of limited speech possibilities. This was a silence denouncing silencing, and not just an echoing of the voice of power.

The silent demonstration made the authorities as apprehensive as they had been a decade before with the student outcry. There are several reasons for this. Some pre-date the demonstration, and some are contextual, but others, I submit, relate, in specific, to the nature of silence, and the strategic and symbolical value that accrues from its use.

First are the developments pre-dating the demonstration. The Falun Gong had evolved from physical training to competitive worldview or ideology, and had grown their organizational capacity, both at home and overseas. Second is the historical and physical context of the silent staging. It all starts with the choice of date. There was a pattern of citation and iteration there, even though the repertoire of contestation was new. Then, there is the use of a politically sensitive space, the leadership compound. This space was subverted by being vacated of the silence that normally dominates it – of loyalty, of reverence, of ritualized obedience – and filled in by the insubordinate silence of protest, orderly performed, vulnerable yet menacing in its massive embodied presence. Third there is the capacity for coordinated action on show. Their silence was ‘a plan rigorously executed’ (Rich, 1978): not an act of omission, but a collective act of commission.

It is important to pause at this point to examine what is doing the work here. For it can be objected that it is not silence, but voice, that is empowering agency. To explain, where silence is the repertoire of protest it is tempting to say that we are effectively dealing with a case of voice, since protest is a typical case of action translatable into voice-based communication.

This is partly correct, but only partly. There are ways in which silence is like speech, and ways in which it is not. Without acknowledging the latter, we cannot see what in the protest might have been so threatening.

The ‘meaning’ of silent protest can be read against context and speech expectations. In the context of a possible banning of the cult and censoring of its publications, the demonstrators’ silence could be plausibly read as resistance to such measures and demand for recognition of legal status. Such discursive determination would transform the protest into an instance of making demands from the system, or bringing grievances to it, thereby recognizing its legitimacy (Dimitrov, 2008).

But their silence was more subversive. It was doing most of the work in the demonstration, precisely because it was not just like speech, or entirely translatable into speech. In the ambiguity of silence rested its most radical menace. The open-endedness of silence allows people within and outside the group demonstrating to project onto it multiple meanings and competing demands. Neither are these easily answerable, nor are they necessarily demands *on* the system rather than a demand *for* its overturn.

Crucially, the capacity of silence to act through its ambiguity as an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 1990), potentially uniting claims in a new hegemonic project, radically challenged the maxim that silence gives consent. Consent is tacit when it is given by remaining silent or inactive. However, silence can only count as a sign of consent, where there is a right to dissent, which is reasonably easily performed, and where the consequences of dissent are not extremely detrimental (Simmons 1976, p. 280). None of these conditions apply as a rule to authoritarian regimes. Yet, given their repression and control of dissenting voice, they give themselves the freedom to construe silence as a sign of tacit consent. The Falun Gong’s silent insubordination struck at the heart of this assumption. It exposed that any inference of consent from silence was unwarranted. This was enhanced by the demographics of the group’s members making silence together. They made up the kind of subject from which the regime would normally expect loyalty. They were well-behaved, respectable looking, and extracted from cross-social strata, including men and women, young and retirees, and even governmental officials and CPP members. Their silence – an immense, unnerving blank – functioned as a vehicle for the projection of the CPP’s fears of a counter-power with mass appeal.

To this contributed silence, now understood not as empty signifier, but as prefigurative practice. Although it is normally claimed that only speech can put things in common, when silence is made together, it can constitute community. Individually taken, demonstrators projected an image of monastic asceticism, their disciplined silence in the face of threat doubling as an overcoming of the self. Collectively, however, they projected an image of an alternative community. They forced a silence, a meditative pause, in a city where the noise pollution of endless construction files restless citizens day and night. Their silence offered healing, physical and spiritual, to a society enticed but also broken by a ruthless state-led model of development. The demonstrators’ silent site was a site of ideological opposition between competing models of society, one orienting its members to spiritual existence and salvation, the other requiring CPP members to believe in no religion other than economic growth. In prefiguring, through their silent presence, a collective approach to religious life and a mystical experience that might be productive of community “unity”, the demonstrators posed a threat to the regime’s very symbolic order.

This much is clear from the term used to characterize their silence in various media. It was neither 无声[wú shēng]: noiseless, silent (without a voice), nor 沉默 [chén mò]: reticent, uncommunicative, silent (silent by compulsion); nor 缄默 [jiān mò] = 闭口不言 [bi kou bu yan]: forced/active silence, to be reticent, be silent. It was rather 平静 (píngjìng), which means “calm, quiet, tranquil”. It refers to a state of mind, the feeling of being in balance, which includes, but is not limited to, being quiet. There was no mistaking of this silence for the mere effect of coercion or the sound of compliance. The Falun Gong’s silence was defiant, and prefigurative of a competing view of harmonization within the political body – it was political action *in* and *by* itself.

1. **Conclusion**

This article has revisited and extended Hirschman’s simple yet powerful theoretical framework to cast light on the voice-silence dynamics behind the durability, but also the vulnerability, of modern authoritarian regimes. Restricting voice, or even compelling speech, has been a hallmark of modern authoritarianism. Unsurprisingly, therefore, growing voice, especially where independent or dissenting, is taken for the sign of uncontrolled liberalization or authoritarian downfall. As we have seen, the inference is too quick. It does not sufficiently distinguish between different types of voice; it does not account for the informal norms of (self-)contention whereby dissenting voice can be made less contentious; it overlooks the ways in which facilitating dissenting voice to be aired might be an essential recuperation mechanism. Most importantly, it fails to notice that technology has moved us beyond Constant’s world, where public opinion was necessary, but could only be mastered through repression, compulsion, co-option or deception. The new digital era offers an opportunity for authoritarian regimes to let relatively independent citizen voice to be aired while using it to their own advantage as a vast monitoring agency. But this is not without trade-offs. Where the atrophy of organizational networks means that resistance remains episodical and unconnected on the ground, the Internet can (partly) make up for this absence of community and bear the potential for connecting up dissent into larger scale protest.

Constant was right in observing that modern authoritarianism does not rule by means of silence, but rather perceives silence as a menace. This menace goes far beyond the individual right to silence, and its conscious exercise, however. The veil of silence that signals oppression, (strategic) conformity, or even adulation, can also be a silence that impairs the regime’s capacity to act in the world. Its power lies in its opacity, or what it does not say. Silence renders the demos unknowable, impairs the flow of information, and deprives the regime of vital knowledge about others and itself. The silence one hears in authoritarian regimes will be typically a mix of the silence of omission and the silence of commission; imposed silence and the deliberately unspoken; unspoken speech and formalistic speech, which ceases to have any reliable meaning. Where too many are “faking it”, the appropriate words can be uttered, with the seeming appropriate intention, and yet they mean nothing – they amount to “silent speech”, leaving leaders clueless as to what to do, or to how to act in the world.

To recognize the powers that lie in silence, and the threat it represents for authoritarian regimes, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which silence *is* and is *not* like speech. Though silence can have communicative functions analogous to those of speech, it is comparatively low-information. This makes silence ambiguous, and this ambiguity has implications. Firstly, it falls on hearers to interpret silence. While this empowers hearers to construe silence as they wish, it might entrap regimes producing silencing in an “echoistic” delusion, whereby they lose touch with the world around them. Secondly, the ambiguity of silence also makes it a lower-cost alternative to voice and lies behind its strategic value as a form of insubordinate action. This, as Constant saw, might place silence under great suspicion. But given the difficulty of distinguishing between silencing and the silence of resistance, it is still the embodied practice of group silence that is perceived as regime-threatening, as a collaborative achievement pregnant with community-making overtones.

In *Ether*, a short story by Zhang Ran, dissidents rebel against a police state by drawing Chinese characters onto one another’s hands and staging a peaceful demonstration, where they stand in a circle, holding hands to communicate silently. ‘Communicare’ relates to community via ‘making something common’. Where speech implying or inciting collective action is repressed, it can fall on silence – as signal, empty signifier, or embodied agency – to perform community, however fragile, potentially self-disempowering, and susceptible to capture, it may be. As shown in this article, it is only when we locate silence next to voice and exit – as a core concept, not a residual category in Hirschman’s framework – that we are able to see the power dynamics within authoritarian regimes in full.

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1. Constant was more subtle than the quotes suggest, as he insisted that modern despotism needed to maintain the pretence of freedom public opinion, so as to avoid the repressive crudeness of old despotism, under which ‘public opinion slumbers, but it is not fooled.’ (1988, p. 96). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Leniency to those who confess, severity to those who resist’ is a key proviso of the Chinese judiciary system. Those who do not speak – or do not confess – are *ipso facto* deemed to be resisting. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a similar claim, see Sean Gray’s (2012) Meanings of Silence in Democratic Theory and Practice. Unpublished Manuscript, Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

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